

GUY FAWKES AND THE GUNPOWDER PLOT



What was the Gunpowder Plot?



November 5th marks the anniversary of the Gunpowder Plot, a conspiracy to blow up the English Parliament and King James I in 1605. It was intended to be the beginning of a great uprising of English Catholics, who were distressed by the increased severity of penal laws against the practice of their religion. The conspirators, who began plotting early in 1604, expanded their number to a point where secrecy was impossible.

The group included Robert Catesby, John Wright, and Thomas Winter, the originators, Christopher Wright, Robert Winter, Robert Keyes, Guy Fawkes, Thomas Percy, John Grant, Sir Everard Digby, Francis Tresham, Ambrose Rookwood, and Thomas Bates.

Percy hired a cellar under the House of Lords, in which 36 barrels of gunpowder, overlaid with iron bars and firewood, were secretly stored. The conspiracy was brought to light through a mysterious letter received by Lord Monteagle, a brother-in-law of Tresham, on October 26, urging him not to attend Parliament on the opening day.

The Arrest

The arrest of Guy Fawkes is probably one of the best-known incidents of the Gunpowder Plot. However, it will perhaps surprise many people to discover that he was not the leader of the conspiracy. It was Robert Catesby, a young Roman Catholic gentleman who, tired of the many broken promises of James I to grant religious toleration, decided on desperate action. Eventually there were thirteen plotters, three of whom – Guy Fawkes and the brothers John and Christopher Wright – were schoolfellows at St Peter's School in York.

Guy Fawkes, described by those who knew him well as a courteous, gallant and pious man, was known to have been a brave and resolute soldier, with a special knowledge of the use of gunpowder. Having failed in their earlier attempt to dig a tunnel under the House of Lords, the plotters were lucky to be able to rent a cellar directly below the chamber, and in this they stored thirty-six barrels of gunpowder (purchased from official government supplies!) which they covered with iron bars, coal and firewood. It was Guy Fawkes who was to remain in the cellar and light the fuse at the appropriate moment.

The 1st Earl of Salisbury and others, to whom the plot was made known, took steps leading to the discovery of the materials. Towards midnight of 4-5 November 1605, a search party discovered and, after a violent struggle, arrested Guy Fawkes. Other conspirators, overtaken in flight or seized afterward, were killed outright, imprisoned, or executed.

The Interrogation

Guy, claiming to be a servant called John Johnson, was immediately taken before the King – who claimed to be taken by surprise (although he just happened to have a list of questions ready to put to the prisoner). Guy freely admitted that he had intended to fire the gunpowder and blow the Scots back over the border. He did not, at that stage, add that the explosion would have killed not only the King and the Queen, but also the Prince of Wales, the two Archbishops, many other bishops, nobles and scores of Members of Parliament. Gaining no further information, the King ordered the prisoner to be removed to the Tower of London and lodged in the infamous cell known as "Little Ease". This was so small that it was impossible to stand, sit or lie down properly.

The Torture

The King ordered that if the prisoner refused to give any information the "gentler" tortures were to be used on him. Later the government claimed that Guy was so cowardly that he freely gave all the information on first seeing the instruments of torture, and that no torture was therefore necessary. However, the truth of this statement can be judged by the signature of Guy Fawkes before and after his interrogation. It is also worth noting that over two months after he was arrested, this tall, powerfully built man had to be helped up the few rungs of the ladder to his execution. Despite what must have been excruciating pain, Guy held out for three days, hoping perhaps to give his comrades time to escape abroad. Little did he realise that the government already had a complete list of the plotters, some of whom had already been killed or wounded in the fight at Holbeche House, and the rest were soon rounded up and brought to trial, except for Francis Tresham who died, somewhat conveniently for the government, whilst in the Tower. Was he perhaps the double agent?

The result of the trial was in no doubt. All the prisoners, having "confessed", were hanged, drawn and quartered – some in front of St Paul's, the rest in front of Westminster Hall. Guy Fawkes, the best-known plotter, was the last to suffer. Many questions remain unanswered, but it seems obvious that the government knew far more about the plot than they ever admitted and indeed may well have encouraged it – in order to make a dramatic "discovery" which would be most useful propaganda. If this possibility is correct, then it certainly was most successful – the anti-Catholic feeling was to remain and increase in strength, and the position of those Roman Catholics who remained loyal to their faith was made more difficult.

Who was Guy Fawkes?

Guy Fawkes is one of York's best-known historical characters, famous for his involvement in the Gunpowder Plot. He was born in Stonegate, York on 13 April 1570 and baptised at St Michael -le-Belfry on 16 April 1570, where his baptismal register still exists.

He was the only son of parents Edward and Edith and had two sisters, Anna and Elizabeth, who lived and married in Scotton. The family lived with his well-to-do and respected grandmother, Ellen Harrington, who would seem to dislike Edith Fawkes, judging from grudging references and bequests in her will.

Guy's father died in 1578 and his mother remarried a Catholic in 1587, Dionysius Bainbridge, who connected with the Pulleyn and the Percy family. They lived at Scotton, between Knaresborough and Ripley.

Fawkes attended St Peter's School in 1578, where he received Roman Catholic influences, along with other boys. St Peter's previous headmaster, John Fletcher, had been imprisoned for 20 years as a Catholic recusant. Guy's headmaster, John Pulleyn, outwardly conforming, seems to have influenced the boys greatly in two ways – drama and Catholicism.

He was a brave and powerful character, tall, with auburn beard, brown hair and pale blue/grey eyes. Father Greenway described him as "a man of great piety, of exemplary temperance, mild and cheerful demeanour, enemy of disputes, and a faithful friend."

Guy converted to Catholicism at some date unknown. He may have been finally converted by his cousin, Father Richard Collinge of York, who later wrote a begging letter on his behalf. Guy sold land that he had inherited in Gillygate and Clifton (where St Peter's School now stands) and then enlisted for the Spanish army in 1593 to do military service in the Spanish Netherlands (now Flanders, Belgium and Holland). He was wounded twice, had a reputation for bravery and became an expert in mining. In 1601 he was in Madrid where he met up with his old schoolfellow Kit Wright.

He was later joined by Thomas Winter, who presumably enrolled him into the plot as a useful expert, and a Catholic unknown to authorities. He played his part well and behaved with great dignity and courage after his arrest. Guy withstood several days of torture rather than give the names of his fellow conspirators. He was executed in Westminster, on Friday 31 January 1606 (hanged, drawn and quartered). The Wright brothers were both killed in a fight at Holbeche House.

Schoolfellows Who May Have Influenced Guy:

John & Christopher Wright – brothers

Kit Wright was the same age as Guy. He lived near Patrington, so presumably they were boarders. Their mother was imprisoned as a recusant, and their aunt was possibly Margaret Clitherow, the canonised York martyr (having hidden two priests, both Old Peterites, in her house and refused to plead). Both brothers were very active in the Gunpowder Plot.

Oswald Tessimond – (Father Greenway)

He became a Jesuit and is said to be the first priest to learn of the plot. He later escaped to the continent, where he wrote his personal account.

Robert Middleton – same age as Guy

He became a convert and the priest and was very quickly captured. He was martyred at Lancaster in 1601 along with another priest, probably also an Old Peterite. However, he was not involved in the plot.

Edward Oldcorne – Priest

It is said by the government that Oldcorne was meant to have been involved in the plot. He was tortured and executed in 1606.

Bonfire Night

Among those executed after the gunpowder plot was Henry Garnett, the superior of the English Jesuits, who had known of the conspiracy. While the plot was the work of a small number of men, it provoked hostility against all English Catholics and led to an increase in the harshness of laws against them. November 5 is today variously called 'Firework Night', 'Bonfire Night' or 'Guy Fawkes Day' and is still celebrated in England with fireworks and bonfires, on which effigies of the conspirator are burned.

The tradition of Guy Fawkes-related bonfires actually began the very same year as the failed coup. The Plot was foiled in the night between the 4th and 5th of November 1605. Already on the 5th, agitated Londoners who knew little more than that their King had been saved, joyfully lit bonfires in thanksgiving. An Act of Parliament was passed to appoint 5th November in each year as a day of thanksgiving for the 'joyful day of deliverance'. The Act remained in force until 1859. As years progressed, however, the ritual became more elaborate.

Soon, people began placing effigies onto bonfires, and fireworks were added to the celebrations. Effigies of Guy Fawkes, and sometimes those of the Pope, graced the pyres. Still today, some communities throw dummies of both Guy Fawkes and the Pope on the bonfire (and even those of a contemporary politician or two), although the gesture is seen by most as a quirky tradition, rather than an expression of hostility towards the Pope.

Preparations for Bonfire Night celebrations include making a dummy of Guy Fawkes, which is called "the Guy". Some children even keep up an old tradition of walking in the streets, carrying "the Guy" they have just made, and beg passersby for "a penny for the Guy." The kids use the money to buy fireworks for the evening festivities. On the night itself, Guy is placed on top of the bonfire, which is then set alight; and fireworks displays fill the sky.

The extent of the celebrations and the size of the bonfire vary from one community to the next and Bonfire Night is not only celebrated in Britain. The tradition crossed the oceans and established itself in the British colonies during the centuries. It was actively celebrated in New England as "Pope Day" as late as the 18th century. Today, November 5th bonfires still light up in far out places like New Zealand and Newfoundland in Canada.

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